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Schools as social spaces: Towards an Arendtian consideration of multicultural education

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt has been criticised for the sharp distinction she drew between the social and political realms, and her application of this distinction to schools. In this paper, I demonstrate that this distinction can be interpreted as a heuristic that Arendt developed to address a tension that she had encountered in her attempt to understand childhood. She understood schools to be spaces that could prepare children for citizenship. However, she also recognised that attempts to prepare children for citizenship threatened two characteristics of childhood: their vulnerability and their natality. Arendt's heuristic can be fruitful for addressing dilemmas in citizenship education in ethnoculturally plural contexts.

KEYWORDS
Arendt, citizenship education, multicultural education, natality, vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

Of all of Hannah Arendt's essays, 'Reflections on Little Rock' (1959b)[1] is one of the most controversial, and was so from the very beginning. The essay was originally commissioned by the editors of the Jewish magazine *Commentary* in 1957, who then had second thoughts about printing it. By the time it was finally published in a different magazine (*Dissent*) in 1959, it had already been indirectly criticised by Sidney Hook (1958) in a separate pamphlet, and it was published alongside two essays also criticising the piece—from Daniel Spitz and Melvin Tumin, respectively. 'Reflections' is remarkable, then, in that even before the public had read the first word of Arendt's piece, three critiques of the essay had already been printed.

The controversy about the piece, though, was miniscule compared to the controversy to which Arendt was responding in her essay. 'Little Rock' in her title refers to the events that took place beginning September 1957 in the city of Little Rock, Arkansas. Six years earlier, 13 Black[2] parents had been encouraged by the Topeka chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to file a case against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, for disallowing their children from attending 'whites only' schools near their neighbourhoods (see Landman, 2004). Deciding on the case in 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled that all state laws allowing the racial segregation of schools were unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954). Affected states—all in the south of the United States—began to desegregate their schools, at different speeds. Central High School in Little Rock became the site of events which came to publicise the accompanying difficulties. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus and several Arkansas citizens initially refused to comply with the Supreme Court decision. In response, President Dwight Eisenhower sent federal troops in to prevent riots from occurring while nine teenagers, ages 14–17, began to attend Central High School as its first Black students (see Anderson, 2010). They entered the school for the first time in September 1957, amidst jeering crowds. The incidents attracted international press coverage and came to be known as the 'Little Rock crisis'. Military presence remained at the high school throughout that school year, during which the nine teenagers faced daily physical and verbal abuse from some of their classmates. The following year, Faubus closed all four state high schools in Little Rock, reasoning that the move was needed to mitigate the violence. This in turn increased the number of hate crimes against the Black community, who were blamed for the school closures (see Anderson, 2010). Such was the situation when 'Reflections' was published in the Winter 1959 issue of *Dissent*. The four high schools were eventually reopened in August 1959.

The controversy surrounding Arendt's essay arose no doubt largely because it positioned her, a public intellectual who was well respected in liberal circles, on the non-liberal side of a polarised debate. Arendt's essay had two overarching arguments. The first was a criticism of state intrusion into affairs of the private and social spheres. The second was a reflection on childhood and education, and a criticism of the encroachment of politics into children's spaces.

The backlash against Arendt's essay evidently compelled her to be clearer about her position on Little Rock in the succeeding months, and in her subsequent writings that referred to 'Reflections', it was the second rather than the first of these arguments that she emphasised. In 'The Crisis in Education',[3] written a few months after 'Reflections', she reiterated her view that the situation in the South was 'not only intolerable but unconstitutional' but emphasised her opposition specifically to the attempt to 'create a radical change' by '[beginning] with the children in the schools' (Arendt, 1958, p. 497). When 'Reflections' was published in 1959, she likewise prefaced it with a clarification that she firmly supported the Black community in its fight for civil rights. Finally, in 'A Reply to Critics', published in the succeeding issue of *Dissent*, she further clarified that her point of departure had been an attempt to imagine how the mothers of the children affected by the crisis were perceiving the crisis, beginning with a reflection on what she would have done if she had been the mother of a Black child. Her answer was that she would have felt that the 'Supreme Court ruling, unwillingly but unavoidably', had put her child into 'a more humiliating position' than before, by exposing the child 'to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into … where it was not wanted' (Arendt, 1959a, p. 179).

The targets of Arendt's reproach were the adults in general who were involved in the unfolding drama at Little Rock—the NAACP, the 'town's law-abiding citizens' and the federal court system—all of whom she felt had left these youngsters at the hands of the 'mob' (p. 49). Her specific criticism against the NAACP was that they had used the pupils to further their political agenda, while exposing them to harm. While she shared the aspiration of racial integration, she opposed the NAACP's decision to focus on the mandatory desegregation of schools, implying that anti-miscegenation laws should have been their first target instead (ibid.). Furthermore, in 'A Reply to Critics', she proposed the alternative of slowly piloting school integration in those states within willing communities, rather than mandating integration among unwilling ones.

Despite these clarifications, 'Reflections' has continued to be subjected to criticism. It has been used as evidence to demonstrate her misunderstanding of racial issues in the United States or even racist elements in her thought. It has also been cited as one among other examples to demonstrate the limitations of her sharp distinction between the private and public realms.

While I do agree with some of the criticisms levelled against Arendt, in this paper, I argue that her characterisation of the school as a 'social' (rather than political) space in 'Reflections' is nonetheless both insightful and helpful. Focussing on her account of schooling and childhood in 'Reflections' and the way she carried these ideas into her two subsequent pieces on education, I demonstrate that Arendt used the category of the 'social' as a heuristic to help her work out the status of children in political society. The events at Little Rock compelled her to confront childhood as a topic for political reflection, in contrast to her previous political thinking, which had focused on adults. The difference that Arendt intuited between the two generations lay in the tension between children's vulnerability and natality. This led her to conclude that the proper place to navigate it was the liminal space of the social realm, to which the school, she believed, ought to be understood to belong. To show the continuing significance of Arendt's insight, I end this essay by briefly demonstrating the possibilities that this category opens up in thinking about issues pertaining to children's citizenship education in culturally plural contexts.

THE VULNERABLE CHILD

The Little Rock crisis pushed Arendt to articulate her two presumptions about children and their place within a political community. Firstly, she considered them to be vulnerable. Secondly, she saw them as the epitome of natality. This and the next section discuss these two aspects of childhood in Arendt's thought.

Arendt did not develop the theoretical notion of vulnerability in her work. Nonetheless, it was central to her position on the Little Rock crisis. Arendt considered 'the most startling part of the whole business' (p. 50) to be the decision to begin the process of racial integration in schools, that is, among children. The crux of her analysis was founded on a strong belief that children, as vulnerable members of the community, ought to be protected from the chaos of adults' political world.

Her three interlocutors—Spitz, Tumin and Hook—did not oppose her on this point, and Spitz actually agreed with this part of Arendt's argument despite disagreeing with her overall position. Later commentators, however, have downplayed the importance of this argument. Arendt's contemporary Ralph Ellison convinced Arendt that Black children had to be taught from a young age about the importance of sacrifice, and that training them to manage their fear and anger while squarely facing the terror of inescapable racial prejudice was a necessary rite of initiation for Black children at the time (Warren, 2014). More recently, Kathryn Sophia Belle writing under the name Kathryn T. Gines (2014) has built on Ellison's argument in a book-length critique of Arendt's assessment of American race issues. Gines uses the experiences of another teenager, Dorothy Counts, who was integrating in Harding High School in North Carolina at about the same time as the Little Rock Nine, as a counter-argument against Arendt. In opposition to Arendt's portrayal of the nine as vulnerable, Gines highlights Counts' courage, fearlessness and dignity as she walked to Harding High, implying that the Black children integrating at Central High had a similar experience. Finally, while not explicitly criticising Arendt's position, Weissberg (2012) likewise takes issue with Arendt's characterisation of the Little Rock Nine as 'children', pointing out that Arendt did not recognise Elizabeth Eckford (one of the nine) 'as a young woman or a high school girl' (p. 92).

Does the benefit of hindsight confirm that it has been correct to downplay Arendt's concern about the vulnerability of the so-called Little Rock Nine? Taking a historical perspective, it seems that Arendt's critics, after all, are wrong on this point. The nine were not able to participate in the public discourse of the time, but within the past 25 years, three of the students—Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls LaNier and Melba Pattillo Beals—have written memoirs of the events. While the tones of the three books differ from one another, they unanimously recount the physical abuse and psychological pain the nine of them underwent. They were verbally bullied, physically attacked and psychologically taunted by their schoolmates on a regular basis at Central High (Beals, 1994; Jacoway, 2007; LaNier and Page, 2009). Bruises and abrasions were commonplace. Roberts (2009) recalls having to avoid scalding water thrown at him in the locker room, and being injured by a combination lock thrown so hard at his head that he almost fell down from the force. Beals (1994) recalls being pushed down a flight of stairs, and, on another occasion, being hit on the back by a

tennis racquet with such force that she coughed up blood. One of LaNier's regular tormentors was a girl who would trail her closely through school, stepping on her heels as they walked, until they bled (LaNier and Page, 2009). The attacks were not merely physical, nor were they limited to the boundaries of the school. Beals received a death threat from one of her schoolmates. In her senior year, LaNier's home was bombed in an incident for which a Black family friend was charged and found guilty, but for which LaNier believes segregationists were responsible.

Arendt had warned that, for children, the psychological pain of being placed in a social group where they were not wanted could be 'more difficult to bear than outright persecution' (Arendt, 1959a, p. 179). Sadly, the three accounts do record stories of emotional torture. All three describe the crippling fear that they felt while at school, a fear 'much greater than I could have ever imagined … a terror we felt in our bones' (Roberts, 2009, pp. 117–118). Beals recounts the death wishes that occasionally filled the diaries she had written in at the time: 'I wish I were dead'; 'God, please let me be dead until the end of the year' (Beals, 1994, p. 236). The memoirs also describe the sense of loneliness and isolation they felt, both from being unable to participate in activities at their new school (Beals, 1994) and from the occasional expressions of resentment they received from Black friends attending other schools (Roberts, 2009).

Both Roberts and LaNier emphasise in their memoirs that the decision to attend Central High was their own choice. Yet, LaNier, who was 14-year-old at the time of entry, also admits her youthful naïveté when she made that decision and that there were times she 'felt used' (LaNier and Page, 2009, p. 109). Beals' account is the most critical of the adults: 'As I watch videotapes now and think back to that first day …, I wonder what possessed my parents and the adults of the NAACP to allow us to go to that school in the face of such violence' (1994, p. 308). The three students did also feel, to varying degrees, abandoned by many of the adults around them, despite the presence of specific adult family members who demonstrated unwavering support. Their memoirs paint a picture of the students largely being left to their own devices while inside the school. Beals' feeling of abandonment extended to the wider public as well, as she resented the journalists who merely '[observed] our troubles from afar' and were 'content to pretend for the moment that all was well', despite the teenagers' own experiences, which 'showed us that the situation was worsening' (p. 292). Roberts (2009), on the other hand, describes the year as one in which he had to protect his own mother from knowing about what he was going through to prevent her from becoming too alarmed.

Arendt had written that the Little Rock crisis was a case of unfairly '[shifting] the burden of responsibility from the shoulders of adults to those of children' (Arendt, 1959a, p. 180), and she indirectly accused the NAACP of shirking their responsibility of guiding the children (Arendt, 1959b, p. 50). The accounts of the three support her analysis. These past decades, 'Reflections' has stood out for many commentators as an essay which puts Arendt on the wrong side of history. However, our universal acceptance now of the importance of safeguarding people below the age of 18 appears to demonstrate that the harsh judgement of Arendt's essay may yet change. As Beals wrote searingly in her diary: 'The National Veterans Organization has awarded us the Americanism Award. They think we are heroines and heroes. Why are we only Niggers[4] to beat up on to the students at Central High? I don't know if I can make it now. It's really really hard. . . . [W]hen will it ever be fun to live again?' (p. 235).

Reading Arendt's critique alongside the accounts of the students reveals her astuteness at guessing the students' perspective. 'The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero—that is, something that neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be', Arendt wrote (1959b, p. 50). At around the same time, 16-year-old Beals penned these similar lines in her diary: 'Please, God, let me learn how to stop being a warrior. Sometimes I just need to be a girl' (Beals, 1994, p. 217). Referring to the photograph that had triggered her reflections, Arendt went on to describe it as:

> a fantastic caricature of progressive education which, by abolishing the authority of adults, implicitly denies their responsibility for the world into which they have borne their children and refuses the duty of guiding them into it. (Arendt, 1959b, p. 50)

Arendt further lamented that the youngsters were 'being asked to change or improve the world' on behalf of adults (p. 50). This argument, I believe, demonstrates that it was possible to take a reasonable, conscientious position against the

forced integration of Little Rock Central High, despite the understandable unpopularity of this position among liberals at the time.

At minimum, the theoretical significance of the Little Rock crisis is that it stands out as a cautionary tale against assuming that children have sufficient agency and capacities to navigate politically charged situations. By highlighting the actual harm experienced by the students to whom Arendt was referring in 'Reflections', this section provides historical support for the argument on this point that has been developed by other philosophers of education (see Conroy, 2020). Other aspects of Arendt's analysis of race in the United States are problematic, and she admitted as much to Ellison some years later. Moreover, some of her public writings (e.g. the appendix to *On Violence*; Arendt, 1969/1970) and private correspondence (see Arendt and McCarthy, 1995, pp. 229–230) reveal some of her prejudices in her dismissiveness towards African cultures and languages. Nonetheless, in recognising the dangers of exposing children to the situation they found themselves in, Arendt's original judgement, it turns out, had in fact been sound.

CHILDREN AS THE EPITOME OF NATALITY

Apart from their vulnerability, Arendt also saw children as the epitome of natality. In arguing for children's need for guidance, she cited in 'Reflections' the fact that 'in the world', children were 'still … stranger[s]' (Arendt, 1959b, p. 55). Arendt elaborated on this point further in 'Crisis in Education', explicitly connecting children's status as strangers and 'newcomers' to their being 'new human being[s]', and this in turn, to the way that society 'continuously renews itself through birth' (Arendt, 1958, p. 503).

Unlike vulnerability, a concept that Arendt did not explore in-depth in her educational writings, natality and birth were concepts that ran through her opus. As with other key terms in her work, she did not attempt to pin down the meaning of 'natality' at any point in her career, which has led to a debate among Arendt scholars who have sought to develop a more cohesive account of the idea. One of the points of contention is which aspect of 'natality' is most central to Arendt's thought: the *political* sense of 'birth' (sometimes called the 'second birth') in which a person begins to act in the political sphere (see Birmingham, 2006; Bowen-Moore, 1989; Cavarero et al., 2014; d'Entrèves, 1994; Diprose and Ziarek, 2017; Jacobson, 2013), the *physical* 'first birth' when a person is born as a biological creature (see Vatter, 2006), or the *ontological* sense of 'birth' as the condition in which labour, work and action are rooted (see Celermaejer, 2011).

My response to this debate is to propose that Arendt did use the term 'natality' in slightly different ways across her work. Most broadly, she conceived of natality as *the human capacity to act in a way that interrupts the natural and automatic course of events*, as she described it in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 2018, p. 246); this includes especially but not exclusively forms of novelty and 'renewal' that have a large impact on many people (Levinson, 2001, p. 13). She then articulated this broad idea more specifically across her opus, highlighting different aspects of natality in different texts. Autonomy and agency, often emphasised in commentaries that focus on Arendt's political use of the term, are only one manifestation of this capacity. When natality is no longer limited to these political concepts, and instead understood in this broader sense, it becomes clearer how the term also encompasses the other senses of 'birth' found across Arendt's work, such as in both biologistic (and therefore literal) and ontological senses highlighted by different commentators. The term 'natality' can thus also be applied to babies who have not even developed their capacity for speech (*contra* Benhabib, 2000): unlike inanimate objects, babies do act (to the frustration of new parents) in ways that are a 'particular deviation from … natural … cyclical movement[s]' and 'automatic processes', despite their limited agency (Arendt, 2018, p. 246). The concept can also be applied to children who have not yet developed their autonomy. Children act in ways that deviate from expected 'behaviours' (a term Arendt used to describe acts that had been 'conditioned' by society; see p. 45), precisely because they have not yet been enculturated; thus, they act in ways that do not yet conform to society's norms. Yet at the same time, this interpretation does not discount the ways in which natality is threatened by various phenomena in the public and political spaces of adults, as Arendt emphasised in her political theory. In mass consumer society (the topic of a significant part of *The Human Condition*; Arendt, 2018), this

capacity to act in a non-natural way is threatened by the pressure of conformity, and in such a context, it is crucial to develop agency and autonomy. Under conditions of totalitarianism, on the other hand, this capacity is threatened by government mechanisms that seek to completely control human behaviour.

To return to her educational essays: in these works, Arendt expressed the view that children were the epitome of natality, and in 'Crisis in Education', she argued that their newness threatened to overwhelm existing political communities. Thus, she portrayed the natality of the younger generation as something that, despite its promise, was also dangerous, and therefore something that ought to be reined in without being destroyed.

A much earlier work by Arendt, the biography of the 19th century salon host and letter-writer Rahel Varnhagen (written mostly around two decades before 'Reflections'; Arendt, 1957), also contains seeds of insight that can help clarify how Arendt used the concept in relation to education. In the biography, Arendt did not yet use the word 'natality', but she made a connection between the principle of *beginning*, which had featured so prominently in her recently completed work on St. Augustine, and education. Two characteristics that Arendt ascribed to Varnhagen prefigure her later ideas on natality and education. Arendt described Varnhagen as both 'vague' (p. 94) and 'original' (p. 109). These were two sides of the same coin, both resulting from her lack of a deep entanglement with history and tradition:

> No tradition had transmitted anything to her … Without ties because she had not been born into any cultural world … [I]n the paradoxical situation of the first human being, as it were—she was compelled to grasp everything for herself as if encountering it for the first time… Since Rahel insisted upon her ignorance, she provided an example of liberation and lack of fixation upon a particularly historically conditioned world. (Arendt, 1997, p. 109)

Varnhagen was ignorant both of Jewish history—that is, the history of her people—and of German tradition, due to her lack of a formal education. Her ignorance was further magnified by her attempts to escape her Jewishness, a 'fact of her birth'. This lack of rootedness to an identity was what Arendt described as a 'vagueness' in Varnhagen's personality. Yet Arendt also described this lack of rootedness as the very reason for her 'original' personality, her ability to speak without having to 'resort to clichés', and thus her ability to think originally as well.

Arendt singled out these characteristics of originality and vagueness in the service of the overarching narrative she was seeking to construct about Varnhagen's life. Arendt considered Varnhagen's central struggle to be her Jewish identity, which, in 19th century Berlin, was increasingly becoming a hindrance to social acceptability. She interpreted each romantic entanglement that Varnhagen had, as well as many of the friendships that she nurtured, as responses to this struggle with her identity, which at first she sought to escape through either marriage or cultural assimilation, and which she finally accepted towards the end of her life.

Parallels can be seen between this work and Arendt's portrayal of education in 'Crisis in Education'. Arendt saw a lack of education—and specifically, an education in culture and history—as a contributing factor in failing to develop a sense of cultural belonging and identity. Failing to be rooted in an identity had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, such rootlessness allowed for spontaneity that was not hindered by clichés or 'customary expression[s]' (p. 109); on the other hand, such rootlessness prevented a sense of 'personality' from emerging (pp. 85–86).

This tension between history and natality is central, then, to a more robust understanding of natality, especially as she deployed the concept in relation to education. Arendt sought to find a balance between an education that rooted students but that also did not impede their natality. For Arendt, this tension was at the heart of schooling.

THE SCHOOL AS A SOCIAL SPACE

Identifying vulnerability and natality as central characteristics of childhood uncovered for Arendt a tension between the widely accepted function of schools in the modern age and childhood itself, and it is this tension to which I turn in this section.

To begin with, were schools even necessary? Arendt recognised that the ubiquity of schooling across Westernised societies was a historical accident rather than an inevitability. However, she also recognised that in culturally diverse places such as the United States, schools played an 'incomparably more important' political role 'than in other countries', as a mechanism that aided in the cohesion of a political community (Arendt, 1958, p. 494). Within a population composed largely of immigrants and their descendants, schools allowed for the propagation of a shared language and other cultural markers that generated a stronger sense of commonality. This was especially important for newcomers to the community.

Whether schools were necessary in any specific political community, Arendt understood that the rise of mandatory mass education had caused the school to become the most common experience of transition from childhood to public adult life in the West. Whereas parents had previously played the primary role of preparing children for public, adult life, the norm in modern times was for teachers and other adults at school to now assume that role. These adults thus were representatives of the parents and of the entire adult generation in helping the children transition to public life.

Preparing children for political life, however, put schooling itself at odds with childhood, in two ways. Firstly, political life, as we have seen above, could be difficult, and for children who did not yet have the skills to navigate its complexities, even potentially harmful. How, then, could adults protect children's vulnerability while simultaneously initiating them into the adult world? Secondly, providing a counterweight to children's natality required enculturation, and enculturation tended to be assimilative. Such assimilation ran the danger of impeding children's natality. How, then, could a balance be found in helping children develop a rooted sense of identity without hindering their natality? I argue in this section, that Arendt's answer to these two questions was the category of 'the social'.

Vulnerability

In both 'Reflections' and 'Crisis in Education', Arendt portrayed the private realm as a realm characterised by safety, the secure realm that could 'shield [the] young' from the public realm (Arendt, 1959b, p. 55). She believed that such a refuge was important for all humans, but particularly for children, who needed 'a place of security where they [could] grow' (Arendt, 1958, p. 505) before entering the political realm. However, modernity had created an interstitial space, the school, which was 'the institution we interpose between the private domain of home and the world' to facilitate this transition (p. 507).

Notably, in arguing that the school ought not to forget its protective role, Arendt did not describe the school as 'private'. Rather, she chose to use the word 'social', demonstrating a conception of the school as the bridge between the private and the public spheres. In this sense, I consider Fanny Söderbäck's (2018) reading of Arendt to be mistaken. Söderbäck portrays Arendt as having maintained a strict separation between the private realm, where biological birth took place, and the public realm of political action, allowing then for no period of 'gestation' leading to the 'second birth' of political action (p. 277). Söderbäck may have glossed over Arendt's educational readings, which clearly show that Arendt thought of the modern school as the site of a process of gestation.

In using the word 'social' rather than 'private' to describe the school, Arendt had evidently found it useful to deploy the category of 'the social' in a new way. She had used the word 'social' in previous works to refer to the social activities of 'good society' or the manifestations of unthinking conformity in mass society. In her educational writings, the liminality expressed by the word—that is, its ambiguity as having characteristics of both private and public realms—made it a useful heuristic for her thinking about schools, spaces that, like the salons during Varnhagen's time, had an element of publicity without being political. In contrast to the salons, though, Arendt viewed the sociality of schools as a positive attribute. As Arendt put it in 'Reflections', 'For the child himself, school is the first place away from home where he establishes contact with the public world that surrounds him and his family' (Arendt 1959b, p. 55). Schools thus allowed children to take baby steps into the world without fully exposing them to the harshness of the political space. It could do this by giving children some degree of the security that private life, constituting a 'shield against the

world and specifically against the public aspect of the world', had by default given children in the age before modern education (Arendt 1958, p. 504).

Arendt's disapproval of the NAACP's actions in relation to Little Rock, then, ironically had the opposite tenor of her reproach of the Jewish communities in the 1930s. At that time, she had criticised the sociality of Jewish communities for generating an insularity that hindered them from crossing into true political action. In the 1950s, she criticised the NAACP for violating the sociality of schools by purposely exposing children to the chaos of political action. Thus arose Arendt's controversial formulation that schools ought to be envisioned as social rather than political.

An easy objection to level against Arendt's formulation is that her distinction is impossible because of the intrinsic political character of schools. As institutions constructed within a political community (and often regulated if not entirely run by the state apparatus), every component of the school—the content it teaches, the status of teachers, the selection of students, etc.—is a product of politics. Such an objection, however, misunderstands the distinction that Arendt was seeking to make. Arendt's advocacy that schools ought to be social rather than political spaces was not a denial that schools were subjected to politics. We can imagine she was fully aware that her own action of writing a commentary about schools was a political one, and the fact that she presented an alternative path towards the goal of school desegregation confirms this. Rather, Arendt was insisting that the space within the school—that is, the space where teachers and children interacted with each other—be distinguished from the political space outside the school where adults fought political battles about education. The alternative path she proposed in 'A Reply to Critics'—the setting up of pilot integrated schools in communities that desired school integration—demonstrates her position that the political action inevitably required to push for positive changes in schools could and should be enacted in a way that minimised the potential harm to pupils (Arendt, 1959a; see Cole, 2011). The photograph of one of the Little Rock Nine being verbally attacked by a jeering crowd had led Arendt to conclude that in the Little Rock case, the agonistic struggle of politics had entered the boundaries of the school itself.

A more nuanced criticism of Arendt's position, however, questions the degree to which her distinction between the social and the political is helpful. On the one hand, it can be admitted that the distinction is a useful reminder that a primary responsibility of schools is the protection of children, and that insofar as it is possible, this ought not to be violated by the political struggles surrounding children's education. Nonetheless, the valid question can be raised whether the characterisation of schools as such might fall into the danger of minimising the importance of the political struggle surrounding education or even being used as an excuse to perpetuate injustices within the educational system. I view such an objection, however, as a question about degrees of emphasis rather than essence, because it is likely that even those who defend the political use of schools would agree that any harm to which children are exposed ought to be, if not minimised, then at least proportionate to the political change being sought. The more productive question that can arise out of the debate, then, is the degree to which the exposure of children to potentially harmful situations is permissible, if such exposure is deemed unavoidable to effect a desired political change.

Identity and natality

The second tension that shaped Arendt's thinking about schools was the tension between the need to help children develop a rooted sense of identity and the desire to avoid hindering their natality. This tension was not fully articulated in 'Reflections', where she interwove a defence both of the private sphere and of the social sphere that was not always clear about their distinction. Nonetheless, if we parse her argument, focussing on her description of the social sphere and her defence of the freedom of association, we can see how the essay prefigured some of the arguments she developed more clearly in 'The Crisis in Education'.

In 'Reflections', Arendt emphasised that although the abolition of legislation enforcing school segregation was 'of great and obvious importance' (Arendt, 1959b, p. 49), the 1954 Supreme Court ruling did not of itself force Black and white pupils to begin attending the same school, in the same way that decriminalising miscegenation would not force couples to enter into mixed marriages. What she was opposed to, however, were the later events that, in her view, had

forced Little Rock students to associate with people from other racial backgrounds 'against their will', a situation that she likened to forcing a mixed marriage (pp. 49–50, 55).

Arendt's analogy was flawed. President Eisenhower's actions had not forced the students to mingle socially with each other (they barely did at school, except when the white students were harassing the nine). Moreover, she focussed only on the unhappiness of the white parents who did not want Central High to be desegregated. The question might be raised: if there were white parents who were no longer happy with Central High because it was now an integrated school, why should *they* not pull their children out of Central High and send them elsewhere, rather than imply that the Black parents ought to pull their children out?[5]

Despite these flaws, in constructing her argument, Arendt nonetheless made an important point. Her argument was built around a vigorous defence of the freedom of association, echoing Tocqueville (whose ideas on the topic she had in fact underlined in her personal copy of *Democracy in America*; The Hannah Arendt Collection, 2017). Arendt understood the social sphere to be distinct from the political sphere, but, like Tocqueville (1945), also a possible preparation for the political sphere; moreover, she intuited that social associations (such as the Jewish communities she had criticised in the 1930s), by virtue of being public, themselves could potentially become political associations, an idea that she would explore elsewhere in her advocacy of council democracy (see Lederman, 2018). Arendt was suspicious, then, of any actions that could cause 'very important possibilities of free association and group formation [to] disappear' (Arendt, 1959b, p. 51), and this included state attempts to hinder or regulate the spirit of association in the public realm broadly, whether this was the public-social realm or the public-political realm. In other words, her defence of the spirit of association in the social sphere was ultimately motivated by a desire to defend the political sphere, which, like the social sphere, belonged to the public realm.

Arendt carried this suspicion of state regulation over to schools (and Central High School, in this specific case). Understanding schools to be places of association, she objected in principle to state intrusion in schools. As mentioned above, she pragmatically understood that modernity had made schools an almost irremovable fixture, and that laws had made schools compulsory for valid reasons. However, she believed that state regulation of schools ought to be kept to a minimum, limited only 'to the content of the child's education' and more specifically, only to '[prescribing] minimum requirements for future citizenship and … to further and support the teaching of subjects and professions which are felt to be desirable and necessary to the nation as a whole' (Arendt, 1959b, p. 55).

Towards the end of 'Reflections', Arendt briefly highlighted the role that schools play as places of enculturation. She mentioned the right of parents 'to bring up their children as they see fit' (p. 55), and then emphasised the role that 'authorities' play in a child's life 'to guide it into the world in which he is still a stranger, in which he cannot himself by his own judgement' (pp. 55–56). This was an idea that she fleshed out further in 'Crisis on Education', where she also brought out more clearly its tension with children's natality, a tension that, as described above, she had previously intuited when writing about Varnhagen.

In 'Crisis in Education', Arendt described natality as 'the essence of education'. This phrase can be understood in two ways, the distinction between which (again) is more a matter of emphasis rather than a fundamental difference. It can be argued that for Arendt, education was the response required to address the *threat* created by natality: education as the antidote to natality. However, a more radical interpretation is to see education as the very foundation which makes natality possible.

Mordechai Gordon (1999) has taken the more radical approach. He focusses on the political interpretation of 'natality', and depicts Arendt's educational conservatism through this lens. For Gordon, Arendt is fundamentally different from other educational conservatives—it might even be said that he does not present Arendt as a conservative at all—because her advocacy for teaching the past has nothing to do with the conservation or preservation of the past as past. Rather, in his depiction, Arendt argues that knowledge of the past is 'essential to help children realise their possibility of creating something new' (Gordon, 1999). His interpretation, however, does not lend sufficient weight to the real crisis that Arendt saw with the advent of modernity. It does not sufficiently account for the almost apocalyptic way that she described the changes in culture that she was witnessing, which she wrote about in 'The Crisis in Modernity'. Nor

does it lend sufficient weight to Arendt's later emphasis, post-*Human Condition*, on the need for political communities to ground themselves in a common source of principles, such as a Constitution.

My own position is that Arendt did take the threat of the new very seriously, and this aligns with Benhabib's characterisation of Arendt as a '*reluctant* modernist' (Benhabib, 2000; emphasis mine). It was, after all, the promise of the new that had swept totalitarian governments into popular power. 'The new' for Arendt was a double-edged sword. While it held the promise of renewal for people in the ruins of tragedies of history, it also held the promise of destruction as it threatened to destroy the stability of history. (Arendt would, in fact, continue reflecting on this burden of natality into the latter part of her career. In her posthumously published book, *Life of the Mind*, Arendt, who championed thinking, also noted that thinking itself is 'dangerous' and 'destructive'.) As Levinson (2010) has articulated, 'The Crisis in Education' was Arendt's criticism of the way that American infatuation with the new had led to a kind of progressive education that no longer fostered in students a 'love of the world', an attentiveness to what was taking place in the public and a historical consciousness of those events, which would prepare children for their eventual participation in the political realm. Connecting these ideas to *The Human Condition*, Jan Masschelein (2001), too, has noted how, more recently, the new has been appropriated in anti-political ways into a language of learning that serves labour and consumption, with newness 'made functional and productive for the given order' (p. 16).

Connecting this reading of 'The Crisis in Education' back to 'Reflections' indicates the reason why Arendt began 'Reflections' by reflecting on the cultural heterogeneity of the United States broadly and the relative homogeneity of the South, 'whose population is more homogeneous and more rooted in the past than that of any other part of the country' (Arendt, 1959b, p. 47). For Arendt, the United States was a prime example of the modernist world where cultural commonalities that had held previous political communities together were disappearing. She recognised the 'enormously difficult' task in the United States of the 'melting together of the most diverse racial groups', which she believed could 'only be accomplished through … schooling' (Arendt, 1948, p. 494). However, she also wished to defend families' (and by extension, local communities') right to raise children as they saw fit. Finally, in 'Crisis in Education', she reflected on how this came into tension with children's natality. In other words, Arendt saw the tension of schooling at two levels: between the enculturation of the child desired by the state and the enculturation desired by families and communities, and between enculturation in general and the natality of the individual child.

Bearing these tensions in mind, she deployed the word 'social' in relation to the unique role that she thought schools ought to play. By using the word 'social' to describe schools, Arendt was able to characterise schools as legitimate places of assimilation rather than distinction, and in this way, she was challenging the position (that she attributed to progressivism) that schools ought to encourage natality without simultaneously orienting schools to the old.

At the same time, however, Arendt was mindful of the dangers of a kind of education that could become totalitarian. Just a few years before writing 'Reflections', she had written the essay 'Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government' (later incorporated into *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), which contained a line that has since then often been quoted: 'The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instil convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any' (Arendt, 1953, p. 314). How then, might schooling be 'assimilative' in terms of enculturating children but simultaneously protective of children's natality? Arendt had, in fact, addressed precisely this question in a much earlier educational essay, '*Aufklärung und Judenfrage*' (Arendt, 2007, translated as 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question'). In that essay she problematised the Enlightenment approach to teaching history that treated historical accounts as absolute. Referring specifically to the teaching of Jewish history in Jewish schools, she argued for a historicisation of history itself, not just in historiography, but even in school history. This might be operationalised as a way of teaching history in a way that recognises the historical contingency of the very historical narratives which are told.

TOWARDS AN ARENDTIAN APPROACH TO EDUCATION IN CULTURALLY PLURAL CONTEXTS

In what way are Arendt's reflections relevant today? The two tensions that motivated her thinking about schooling continue to be central to present-day attempts to imagine citizenship education in contexts where pupils come from a

plurality of cultures. In this section, I highlight some of the possible paths opened up by an approach informed by these reflections.

As mentioned above, writing in the 1950s, Arendt was aware of the distinct role that schools played in an country of immigrants such as the United States, in contrast to the relative homogeneity of European countries, which she described as 'nation-states'. However, the conditions of cultural plurality that Arendt ascribed specifically to the United States are now also true in numerous countries across Europe. Moreover, especially after the global wave of political decolonisation in the mid-20th century, cultural plurality is an issue of concern beyond these places as well, especially in post-colonial settings where colonisers drew borders around territories inhabited by a mix of ethnolinguistic and ethnocultural groups. The tensions that Arendt recognised in Little Rock, between the school's role and the responsibility adults owed to children, have parallels today.

I have articulated Arendt's first question as, 'How can adults protect the vulnerability of a child while simultaneously initiating the child into the adult world?' This question is relevant to citizenship education in contexts where there are fears that co-existing cultures may clash (or are already clashing) with each other. Conroy (2020) has already previously drawn on Arendt to caution against expecting schools to solve political problems, emphasising the value of maintaining a distinction between the sphere of the school and the external public world. In this paper I have further shown how Arendt's reflections caution us against the more specific dangers that may arise from compelling schools to solve problems associated with the cultural pluralism of political communities. Such dangers are historically clear in many post-colonial contexts, where schools were used to suppress or even eliminate minority or Indigenous cultures in the guise of political progress (e.g. to forge a more monocultural nation-state); however, even in contexts where such past actions are now acknowledged to have been mistakes, discourses about multiculturalism and education continue to imagine particular configurations of schooling as the antidote to political difficulties. Arendt's view was that political problems, including those related to cultural pluralism, must be solved by adults. Such a critique allows then for the possibility of moderating the goals of multicultural educational initiatives (or reframing their 'success indicators', if you like), by imagining them as the orientation of children to a public world that is fraught with tension, rather than as the solution to those tensions.

I have articulated Arendt's second question as, 'How can a school help a child develop a rooted sense of identity without hindering the child's natality?' Arendt's recognition of the tension between identity and natality provides a lens through which to see the complexity of education in culturally plural contexts, especially from the perspective of a child who does not fully identify with the dominant culture.

This last phrase is important. Multicultural citizenship education is often imagined from the perspective of the dominant—that is, the most powerful—culture. (In post-colonial contexts, this culture might not even be the culture to which the majority of the population belongs, but, rather, the culture of a colonial power.) Because such education is, first and foremost, a form of *citizenship education*, it typically prioritises the concept of the nation-state and the allied ideology that emphasises the state and the nation as primary forms of political and social organisation (see Malešević, 2011). In practice, this often slips into privileging the dominant nation (and its culture) as the lens through which the state is viewed, and minority nations and peoples are reduced to the periphery, even in approaches that claim to be 'multicultural'. An Arendtian approach to citizenship education might be one that, out of respect for the natality of the next generation, allows space for that generation to question the fixity of such ideas while at the same time inducting them into the knowledge of this way of framing the organisation of the world. Similar to the approach that Arendt recommended in *Aufklärung und Judenfrage*, this can be accomplished by historically contextualising the presumptions of citizenship education even as they are taught.

Similarly, an Arendtian approach allows us to imagine a way to teach about 'identity' that straddles both rootedness and natality. Whether children are being taught about the culture of their local community or the dominant culture in their state, they can be taught such in a way that avoids the portrayal of these cultures as fixed. This can be done both by pointing out the historicity of any cultural marker, and also by laying bare the negotiations and conflicts among the different cultures that co-exist. With the guidance of adults, children can then begin to imagine a new future.

CONCLUSION

I have shown in this paper how the liminality expressed by the category 'social' allowed Arendt to conceptualise schools as having two features that she thought were important. First, it allowed her to address her concern about children's vulnerability by introducing a space that was public but also protective. Secondly, it allowed her to emphasise the process of enculturation within schools that she thought was crucial in helping the next generation develop a 'love for the world'. Clearly, Arendt was using the word 'social' in her educational essays differently from the way she had used the term in the past. Unlike the social spaces that she had previously criticised, as well as the mass society that she would criticise in *The Human Condition*, the school ought not to be a worldless space. In addition, the educational space was distinctive as an intergenerational social space where adults were meant to bear the important and delicate responsibility of initiating children into the political community.

I have also shown that despite the historical specificity of Arendt's reflections on the Little Rock crisis, her ideas are potentially useful in other culturally plural contexts as well. This demonstrates the continued helpfulness of Arendt's insights in addressing contemporary educational issues, and indicates possible directions for future scholarship.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Hereafter referred to as 'Reflections'.

[2] In referring to African Americans, Arendt used the word 'Negro', following the American conventions of her time. In this paper, I leave direct quotations from Arendt's work unchanged, as well as direct quotations from other texts that use racial slurs. However, I use the word 'Black' in my own voice. I am conscious that 'Black' is a racialisation rather than a biological category, and I use the word with a capitalised first letter out of respect for the way that members of the African American community have strategically used this word in a political way.

[3] Hereafter referred to as 'Crisis in Education'.

[4] See Footnote 2.

[5] See Anderson (2010) for an account of one white parent's request to transfer her daughter to a different school.

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